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CONCERNING ORGANIZATION IN PARAGRAPHS

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Not often is a textbook so vivid and inviting that a teacher will fear ill effects from any part of it which he feels unsuited to the needs of his students. Boys and girls are usually only too glad to escape passages not definitely assigned; and even if they glance over other parts of the book, they are not likely to be seriously affected. But *The Writing of English*, by Manly and Rickert, is in many ways exceptional. In fact, the book seems so likely to teach itself that in offering it to immature students, in secondary schools, for instance, teachers should take measures to prevent possible unsatisfactory results of its treatment of the paragraph. For not only is the method by which the authors approach the writing of paragraphs unusual, but their whole conception of paragraph structure is "unorthodox." And this innovation, unlike most that they have made, does not seem its own warrant.

Since the publication of Barrett Wendell's *English Composition*¹ in 1891, teachers of composition have regarded the structure of the paragraph as a matter for prevision. Instead of composing sentences as the sentences come, the writer plans first a logical structure of thought. With this conception the treatment of Manly and Rickert is not in accord. Their suggestions for the internal organization of the paragraph are on the contrary as follows:

When you have outlined your paper, you find that each head suggests material for a paragraph or group of paragraphs. How shall you proceed to fill in the outline—to organize your sentences under each division of the thought?

Here, as in the case of the sentence, the fundamental idea is movement. The thought must progress from the first sentence to the last; the reader must feel that he is going forward, not round and round in a circle. It is not enough

¹ "In that case [sentences] we apply our knowledge in revision; in this case [paragraphs] we apply it in prevision" (*English Composition*, p. 126).

merely to tie together a group of sentences all relating to the same topic; they must be placed so that each marks a definite advance toward a goal that you have in mind when you begin the paragraph.

If you wish your reader to share your knowledge of that goal, you may state it in a sentence—technically known as the topic sentence¹—at the beginning of the paragraph. . . . But whether you state it or not, it should always lie before you in your outline; and continual reference to it will keep you to the point.

The development of the paragraph is to a considerable extent determined by the subject itself. You will inevitably think in one of three ways about any subject which you are going to discuss.

1. If it is concrete—a person, thing, place, event, etc.—you will naturally think about its parts and qualities; you will develop it by details.

2. If it is abstract—a class, a truth, a law—you will look for illustrations of it in the concrete; you may develop it by examples.

3. Instead of developing the topic by details and examples, you may simply repeat the same idea in different ways; that is, you may develop it by repetition.

In one of these ways you must think; but they determine only the content of your paragraph, not the order in which the sentences shall stand. . . . Now remembering that the fundamental idea of the paragraph is movement, progress, you will see that this progress can be maintained by two general methods:

1. You may arrange your details, examples, or repetitions in the order of climax. . . .

2. You may, instead of moving straight forward to a climax as your goal, zigzag by the use of comparison, which shows analogy between the thought of the paragraph and another thought introduced into the paragraph for the sake of this effect; or between the details and examples which are already component parts of the paragraph. . . .

The most effective paragraphing is that in which both these methods are used with the greatest freedom, either singly or in combination.

Clearly the process of composition foreshadowed and recommended above is this: Having formed a brief topic outline, take one of its subheads as the goal of your paragraph. If you wish, frame a topic sentence—it makes for clearness. With this sentence as the first of your paragraph, or merely before you, let your thoughts progress. They will inevitably suggest either (1) parts

¹ Note that they make the topic sentence the goal instead of the point of departure—subject about which a predicate is to follow. This predicate is the goal. For a full discussion of this point, consult Arlo Bates, *Talks on Writing English*, Second Series, pp. 103-26.

and qualities—details, (2) illustrations in the concrete—examples, or (3) different forms of the same idea—repetition. The ideas that so occur should be arranged according to climax or according to a zigzagging comparison with material introduced for the sake of analogy or contrast.

Certainly this is not prevision in the usual sense of formulating the idea one wishes to explain, indicating in an outline the exact contribution of each item to be introduced into the paragraph, and arranging according to the familiar sequences—known to unknown, simple to elaborate, near to remote, cause to effect, antecedent to consequent. Notice also that of the seven kinds of subjects instanced, five under (1) and one of those under (2) cannot possibly provide topic sentences. A sentence cannot be person, thing, place, event, or class. Nor can you by thinking about *parts* and *qualities* develop a proposition such as “Macbeth stabbed Duncan,” though the proposition is concrete enough.

To be sure, it is no unforgivable sacrilege to blaspheme against the gospel according to Wendell. But let a class of secondary-school pupils only normally scatterbrained try to learn paragraph structure by the method of Manly and Rickert, and you can hope for no better results than the following extract from a student theme. Note how it follows faithfully the directions they give: the general subject is “Outdoor Sports,” classified into baseball, tennis, football, etc.; the topic sentence of this particular paragraph is stated at once, and the details follow in order of their natural occurrence to a writer using the system suggested; notice that recollection of the initial sentence helps pull back into line the sentence before the last.

I am especially fond of tennis because there is so much exercise connected with it. On a frosty winter afternoon, sunshiny and windless, nothing is so refreshing and warming as a game of tennis. Not only under this favorable condition, but at any time of the day or year, I find tennis just the sport I would most enjoy. My ambition is to be able to serve and receive swiftly. I think a most tantalizing occurrence is to find yourself in this position: to be near the net with your opponent near the back and to drop a ball just over the net, out of your opponent's reach, and find it to have landed out. I think it is very interesting to watch two good players indulge in a set of singles. Each is ready for any trick the other might play on him, and at the same time tries to catch his opponent unawares.

The authors must accept such a paragraph as meeting their requirements. For, devoid of unity as this paragraph appears to the orderly adult mind, it seems to secondary-school students a faithful execution of the directions the book offers.

A formal sentence outline reveals the absence of logical structure:

I like to play tennis,

for

I. There is much exercise in it,

for instance,

A. On a winter afternoon it is warming,

and

B. At any other time it is enjoyable;

II. It is my ambition to serve and receive swiftly,

for

A. It is tantalizing to drop a ball over the net out of your opponent's reach and have it land out;

III. It is interesting to watch two good players,

for

A. Each is on the alert for any trick of the other,

and

B. Each is trying to catch his opponent unawares.

Most secondary-school students can see at once the inconsistency of "I like to play tennis, for it is my ambition to serve and receive swiftly." But without some such artificial means of bringing out in visible form the underlying error, students are likely to attribute the weakness of the paragraph to detailed ineptitudes of phrasing. They miss completely the graver fault, that the paragraph focuses on no one proposition; that even when it returns, in sentence 6, to "I enjoy tennis," "tennis" now means observing, not playing, the game. Into the writing of such paragraphs this new treatment of paragraph structure is likely to carry immature students.

The trouble is that *The Writing of English* presupposes as already established a literary power of correlating ideas which is by no means instinctive, but must be developed by the teacher of composition. The student inevitably does *not* think in one of the three ways (details, examples, repetition) about any subject he is going to discuss. Instead, he follows the law of association of ideas—what James calls the law of neural habit. If you would see this law operate *in puris naturalibus*, recall Dame Quickly or Miss Bates—whom James quotes, by the way, to illustrate the

way in which the undisciplined mind normally thinks. In his words, "Hear how she redintegrates!"

"But where could you hear it?" cried Miss Bates. "Where could you possibly hear it, Mr. Knightley? For it is not five minutes since I received Mrs. Cole's note—no, it cannot be more than five—or at least ten—for I had got my bonnet and spencer on, just ready to come out—I was only gone down to speak to Patty again about the pork—Jane was standing in that passage—were you not, Jane?—for my mother was afraid we had not any salting-pan large enough. So I said I would go down and see, and Jane said: "Shall I go down instead? for I think you have a little cold, and Patty has been washing in the kitchen." "Oh, my dear," said I—well, and just then came the note. A Miss Hawkins—that's all I know—a Miss Hawkins, of Bath. But, Mr. Knightley, how could you possibly have heard it? for the very moment Mr. Cole told Mrs. Cole of it, she sat down and wrote me. A Miss Hawkins. . . ."

Education consists largely in liberating thought from such complete subservience to the accident of two experiences having occurred together: it endeavors to substitute for the law of total recall a selection of more useful and purposeful associations. The old-fashioned formal sentence outline, because it checks random associations and develops in the maturing mind a conception of relevancy, is too valuable to discard. Manly and Rickert are not only "unorthodox" in discarding it; they are unorthodox without being progressive, and without substituting any other adequate check against vague, purposeless thinking. But the fact that the new method of structure recommended by them seems less formal, and involves no mechanism except framing a topic sentence, and advises the student to let his mind react on this sentence as it will—assuming that it cannot go wrong—and merely to arrange what occurs to him in order of climax or of comparison, makes it a method perilously alluring to student and teacher. Unfortunately, a sense of relevancy can be developed only by painstaking discipline. For the mind which has not been disciplined there is no such thing as the painless extraction of ideas.

We older people can hardly realize the experience of our little Miss Bates, age fifteen, trying for the first time consciously to write with unity, coherence, and emphasis. Under the old formal-outline-before-writing method she was at the outset furnished with a frame so rigid that not even she could fit into it material irrelevant to the topic sentence. Using *The Writing of English*, she is hardly

likely to produce a composition more closely knit than the prose of young Mr. Brown, in Cardinal Newman's "Elementary Studies."¹ In fact, this prose, which Newman produces to illustrate ridiculous boyish writing, answers the requirements of *The Writing of English*, and might well have been written by a student far less scatter-brained than Miss Bates, relying on that textbook. Suppose even Mr. Brown, for instance, a person of wider reading and greater maturity than Miss Bates, desiring to improve his style, were to compare his composition with Manly and Rickert's directions for writing. His composition reads as follows:

(1) Of all the uncertain and capricious powers which rule our earthly destiny, fortune is the chief. (2) Who has not heard of the poor being raised up, and the rich being laid low? (3) Alexander the Great said he envied Diogenes in his tub, because Diogenes could have nothing less. (4) We need not go far for an instance of fortune. (5) Who was so great as Nicholas, the Czar of all the Russians, a year ago, and now he is "fallen, fallen from his high estate, without a friend to grace his obsequies." (6) The Turks are the finest specimen of the human race, yet they, too, have experienced the vicissitudes of fortune. (7) Horace says that we should wrap ourselves in our virtue, when fortune changes. (8) Napoleon, too, shows us how little we can rely on fortune; but his faults, great as they were, are being redeemed by his nephew, Louis Napoleon, who has shown himself very different from what we expected, though he has never explained how he came to swear to the Constitution, and then mounted the imperial throne.

(9) From all this it appears, that we should rely on fortune only while it remains—recollecting the words of the thesis, "Fortes fortuna adjuvat"; and that, above all, we should ever cultivate those virtues which will never fail us, and which are a sure basis of respectability, and will profit us here and hereafter.

Again a formal sentence outline would make clear the faulty structure:

Fortune favors the bold,

that is,

I. Fortune raises or lays low,

for instance,

A. Alexander envied Diogenes,

1. Diogenes could have nothing less;

for

B. Nicholas of Russia has fallen;

C. The Turks are pertinent examples,

for

1. Although they are the finest specimen of the race,

2. Yet they have experienced ill fortune;

¹ *Idea of a University*, p. 355. Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1917.

- II. We should wrap ourselves in our virtue when fortune changes;
- III. Napoleon shows how little we can rely on fortune; but
- IV. His faults have been atoned for by his nephew,
 - in that
 - A. He has shown himself different from what we expected, although
 - B. He has not explained how he got rid of the Constitution,
- V. We should rely on fortune only while it remains;
 - and
- VI. We should cultivate virtues which will never fail us,
 - for
 - A. They are a sure basis of respectability,
 - and
 - B. They will profit us here and hereafter.

No student could read through even the main heads as explanation or proof of "Fortune favors the bold" without realizing their absurdity; certainly no class before which they were placed in this form could fail to enlighten a comrade who had written such nonsense.

Consider, however, what happens in the mind of Mr. Brown, told by his father that his composition is badly organized, and endeavoring to gauge his errors by this new technique of organization. Glancing through *The Writing of English*, he finds "organization" occurring in the Table of Contents only in connection with sentence and with paragraph. Organization of the whole composition, he rightly infers, is treated under "External Organization of the Paragraph." He reads:

"In a short piece of writing—for example, less than two thousand words—each paragraph would usually contain all that is said about one main section or phrase [phase?] of the subject . . . it is a good rule to have usually at least one paragraph indentation on each page of manuscript." My external organization must be all right—he thinks—first paragraph, explanation; second paragraph, practical application. Well, how about internal organization?

"The development of the paragraph: . . . You will inevitably think in one of three ways about any subject"—then, if I can't go wrong, why worry?—"In one of these ways you must think; but they determine only the content of your paragraph, not the order in which the sentences should stand."—Maybe that's what ails the organization, if I can't go wrong in the content. Let's see how they should be arranged.—"You may arrange your details, examples, or repetition in the order of climax. . . . The deepening impression may be due to greater interest, importance, or complexity of idea, or to more striking or beautiful expression of the same idea. . . . You may . . .

zigzag by the use of comparison, which shows analogy or contrast between the thought of your paragraph and another introduced for the sake of this effect. . . . The most effective paragraphing is that in which both these methods are used with the greatest freedom, either singly or in combination. . . . let us analyze a number of paragraphs."—Sounds easy; let's see how they work it.—"The next paragraph is developed chiefly by examples, with some repetition and detail."—That sounds like my composition—

"It was always the little islands that I loved best, and if they were not only small but very remote, like St. Hilda, Kerguelen, or Juan Fernandez, so that a mariner shipwrecked on their shores might have a reasonable chance of being unrescued for years, I rejoiced like the man who has discovered a treasure hidden in a field. 2. Australia interested me not in the least—it was too big. 3. No castaway of twelve years could be expected to manage such a place. 4. The Channel Islands were too near. 5. They suggested the odious possibility of being rescued by a steamer. 6. But the Isles of Aru, Tinian, and Tidore, the Dampier Group, the Solomons, the Celebes—these were the places where a castaway of merit might make his mark."

"The development is as follows: 1, topic, with examples; 2, examples; 3, detail, cause; 4, example; 5, detail, cause; 6, repetition of the topic, with more examples. The order is climactic in its suggestiveness, as you will see if you compare the lists of islands in 1 and 6."

Try the same sort of thing with mine: I let the reader know our goal in the title, "*Fortes Fortuna Adjuvat*." I repeat the topic in the last sentence to remind him that we've reached the goal. Substance must be all right if I inevitably have to think in one of the three right ways about my subject. Besides, it's mostly examples, with a few details, and a comparison or two. Let's try it sentence by sentence, as the book does: 1, topic, with comparison—of course, it isn't just the statement I make in the title; but then, neither is *These were the places where a castaway of merit might make his mark* just the same as *It was always the little islands I loved best*.—I think they are near enough alike; 2, contrasting examples of fortune; 3, example of 2; 4, 5, 6, examples; 7, personal application of 6; 8, example, with contrasting detail; 9, topic repeated, with reasons. Material is arranged in order of increasing interest, from general and remote to modern and personal. Maybe that's not much of a climax, but I don't see that Aru, Tinian, and that lot are so much more suggestive than St. Hilda, Kerguelen, and Juan Fernandez, even if the book says I ought. I don't think mine is any worse in organization than this model!

Faulty and unfair as this comparison is, neither Mr. Brown nor Miss Bates is likely to deal more effectively with the instruction offered. Contrast this result with the help offered by the old method. Tie students down to a topic sentence in the old-fashioned sense of a simple proposition that every statement to

appear in the theme must directly or indirectly either explain or prove. Require them to indicate by the appropriate conjunctive expression the exact relation of main head to subhead. Require them to correlate all this material before they even consider the question of presentation to another mind except so far as this consideration determines the nature of the concrete illustrations or evidence chosen. In that way, and in that way only, have most of us found that the vagrant mind of adolescence can be held to the task at hand. Not even Miss Bates and Mr. Brown write without a qualm,

Fortune favors the bold;

that is,

I. Fortune raises or lays low,

and

II. We should wrap ourselves in our virtue when fortune changes,

and

III. Napoleon shows us how little we can rely on fortune, etc.

If simple sentences be required, if a keen sense of the actual force of conjunctive expressions be cultivated, and if logical slips are relentlessly pointed out, straight thinking becomes habitually precedent to writing. As a device for teaching the discursive to write with unity the formal outline should not be replaced with the fatally welcome assurance that "in one of these ways you *must* think."

It may appear unduly pessimistic to insist on the natural discursiveness of the immature mind, and unduly pedantic to insist on stating a proposition as opposed to the noun topic; but the burden of proof lies with the innovators. Recall what Mr. Black has to say concerning the style of boys, a propos of this same theme of Mr. Brown's. The passage should be taken to heart by all teachers of composition. He says:

Now look here, the subject is "Fortes fortuna adjuvat"; now this is a proposition; it states a certain general principle, and this is just what an ordinary boy would miss, and Robert does miss it. He goes off on the word "fortuna." "Fortuna" was not his subject; the thesis was intended to *guide* him, for his own good; he refuses to be put in leading strings; he breaks loose, and runs off in his own fashion on the broad field and in wild chase of "fortune," instead of closing with a subject, which as being definite, would have supported him.

It would have been very cruel to have told a boy to write on "fortune;" it would have been like asking him his opinion of "things in general." Fortune is "good," "bad," "capricious," "unexpected," ten thousand things all at once . . . and one of them as much as the other. Ten thousand things may be said of it; give me *one* of them, and I will write upon it; I cannot write on more than one; Robert prefers to write upon all.

"Fortune favours the bold"; here is a very definite subject: take hold of it, and it will steady you and lead you on: you will know in what direction to look. Not one boy in a hundred does avail himself of this assistance; . . . all boys are more or less inaccurate, *because* they are boys; boyishness of mind means inaccuracy. Boys cannot deliver a message, or execute an order, or relate an occurrence, without a blunder. They do not rouse up their attention and reflect: they do not like the trouble of it; they cannot look at anything steadily; and, when they attempt to write, off they go in a rigmarole of words, which does them no good, and never would, though they scribbled themes till they wrote their fingers off.

The thesis is "Fortune favors the brave"; Robert has gone off with the nominative without waiting for verb and accusative. . . . He does not merely ramble from the subject, but he starts from a false point. Nothing could go right after this beginning, for having never gone *off* his subject, he could never come back to it. However, at least he might have kept to some subject or other; he might have shown some exactness or consecutiveness in detail; but just the contrary—observe. He begins by calling fortune a "power;" let that pass. Next, it is one of the powers "which rule our earthly destiny," that is, *fortune* rules *destiny*. Why, where there is fortune, there is no destiny; where there is destiny, there is no fortune. Next, after stating generally that fortune raises or depresses, he proceeds to exemplify: there's Alexander, for instance, and Diogenes—instances, that is, of what fortune did *not* do, for they died, as they lived, in their respective states of life. Then comes the Emperor Nicholas *hic et nunc*; with the Turks on the other hand, place and time and case not stated. Then examples are dropped, and we are turned over to poetry, and what we ought to do, according to Horace, when fortune changes. Next, we are brought back to our examples, in order to commence a series of rambles, beginning with Napoleon the First. Apropos of Napoleon the First comes in Napoleon the Third; this leads us to observe that the latter has acted "very differently from what we expected;" and this again to the further remark, that no explanation has yet been given of his getting rid of the Constitution. He then ends by boldly quoting his thesis, in proof that we may rely on fortune, when we cannot help it; and by giving us advice, sound, but unexpected, to cultivate virtue. Now, I know how this theme was written, . . . first one sentence, and then your boy sat thinking, and devouring the end of his pen; presently down went the second and so on. The rule is, first think, and then write: don't write when you have nothing to say; or, if you do, you will make a mess of it.

Thus writes John Henry, Cardinal Newman, disguising himself in the person of Mr. Black. And in his opinion of the way in which undisciplined minds normally compose, most teachers of composition in secondary schools will naturally concur.

The study of mathematics teaches the child to reason logically concerning numerical and spatial relations; physics makes him apply similar methods to physical phenomena; history teaches him to connect cause and effect in the past experience of nations. But the central position of English in the secondary curriculum is due to its established value in making the child extend to the whole field of his experience the principles of orderly thinking. Teachers of all subjects feel that the subject-matter of their own courses is more readily grasped and more clearly correlated by students trained by their work in English composition to perceive relevance and to disregard the incidental or the trivial. As well expect a schoolboy untrained in mathematics to demonstrate the Pythagorean theorem intuitively, they think, as to expect him to compose finely without training in composition. Unless we teachers of English try our utmost, however, to convert fumble-witted boys and girls into rational men and women, we betray this trust. Artificial our present device is; but by its use students must test for themselves the relevance of each idea they express. Driven home by regular class practice, the device is nearly fool-proof. After a little practice, most students do catch the idea of relevancy, and can then dispense with the artificial aid. So no matter how ponderous our present method, and no matter how easy and attractive the new, the method of *The Writing of English* tends to substitute, instead of organized unity, a vague and specious fluency.